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[Essay]

## No Such Thing As the Good-Life A Critique and Plea for Ignorance

John Shand\*

### Abstract

This paper argues that there is no such thing as the good-life in some universally valid sense that applies to all individuals. There is only a good-life as it attaches, as a good-life only can, to particular individuals. As such a good-life for a person is unknowable to others, and only somewhat better knowable in advance to the person themselves, while only the individual whose life it is will know the good-life when they encounter it. Therefore, structures and steps to bring about either the good-life for others in a universalizable sense or in a particular sense are deeply mistaken, and likely to do more harm than good, lessening the chances of an individual living a good-life.

### 1.

There may be such a thing as a good-life for an individual, but there is no such thing as the good-life that might be transferred universally across all or even most individuals. That there is no such thing as a universalizable good-life means that a good-life is a particular (specific) to the individual and unknowable to others, and may be largely unknowable to the individuals themselves in advance.<sup>1</sup>

A terminological point. For the sake, one hopes, of clarity, in the following the expression ‘the good-life’ denotes some universally valid good-life that might be supposed definable for people in general. The expression ‘the good-life’ is thus used as one phrase. There are clearly many different conceptions of a putative *the good-life* in that universally valid sense.<sup>2</sup> So it

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<sup>1</sup> It follows as a corollary that there is in principle no such thing as the bad-life, but only bad-lives for individuals. Individuals choose all sort of lives which other individuals would regard as bad-lives, but which are to them good-lives.

<sup>2</sup> One only has to consider the variety of the numerous secular and religious ideologies or belief-systems that incorporate a determinate putatively universally valid conception of the good-life.

may be perfectly possible to talk of *a* the good-life as referring to one of these possible punitively universally valid good-lives. Here ‘a the good-life’ refers to one of the good-lives from the set of those lives each putatively considered *the* good-life. The expression ‘a good-life’ denotes good-life particular to the individual. The expression ‘a good-life’ is without any implication that that life would form a good-life for any other individual or individuals. It does, however, carry the implication that whatever form of a good-life the individual has it need not correspond to some singular putative good-life and that no other good-life could be such a one for that individual. It is common sometimes to say that someone has found the good-life in a non-universalizable sense, suggesting that only one is possible even when individualised, when strictly speaking it might only be a good-life for them in that it is not the only possible good-life they might live as that individual. The argument here not only opposes the notion of the good-life that might be applied across all or most individuals, but also that there might be a good-life as some unique singular kind of life such that it is the only one good-life for any given individual. Thus, there might be a variety of good-lives an individual might find is a good-life for them, but in no case can there be a singular identifiable the good-life either in a universalizable or individual sense. For a life to be a good life for an individual, the only sense in which a life can be good, it does not have to be a phantom universalizable the good-life, but only a good-life, one out of various possible good-lives. Typically there will be some good-life an individual will find as a good-life, but it is possible, if unlikely, that there is none.

While there may be such a thing as a good-life for an individual, we are almost certainly ignorant of what it will be. It is not for nothing that people talk of finding or discovering what is a good-life is for them as their life unfolds. The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to argue that there is no such thing as a usefully universal or pan-individual notion of the good-life, and second to argue that this follows from it being the case that what constitutes a good-life may be understood only in relation to an individual, and that it is unknowable to others and indeed is largely unknowable to individuals themselves in advance, while only they will know what a good life is for them when it happens. There is no such thing as the good-life, and no-one knows for others what a good-life is for them; and the person whose life it is only knows rather better what a good-life would be for them, but only they will know if it is a good-life for them as they live it.

Yet there is no shortage of people queuing up with the intended purpose of prescribing and proscribing, thinking that they know what the good-life is, and by inference what would constitute a good-life not only for themselves but also for others. But not only may a good-life not be inferred from a putative the good-life, there is no singular defensible form that might be thought of as the good-life for it to be inferred from, while in addition a good-life in itself for any individual may not be known independently. The temptation to have a vision, and picture, perhaps an acted out mental play in one's head, of some good-life for someone, is enormous. Moreover, people find it very hard to see their putative help as what it is: a determination in accordance with a pictured outcome. Almost no-one thinks they are doing it. Almost all think they are just guiding helpfully.

This, however, very often tips over into doing things for others for their own good, to make sure that they live in accord with the good-life, or have a good-life, whether they like what is done for them or not.<sup>3</sup> The problematic issue of doing things for other people's own good is not what the argument here attempts to demonstrate; but the dangers inherent in it give urgency to the argument that there is no such thing as the good-life, for without such a demonstration the temptation to benign imposition follows forcefully and readily, while with it it should only follow with extreme doubt, caution and trepidation.

We touch people's lives, and we should be very cautious about what we thereby bring, or do not bring, about, and we should adopt the opposite of a keen attitude to bring about, or not bring about, perhaps based on a putative wisdom, some view we have of the good-life for them. Although the remarks here apply to all people, they perhaps apply notably more to children and young people, who have generally less power than adults in all sorts of ways and may be dragooned, often by structural features within society, and be unable to resist the influence of others and go their own way. Although it is also obvious adults have often had their lives shaped with various degrees of applied force to fit some notion of what is deemed the good-life or a good-life.

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<sup>3</sup> This is beautifully expressed in the following. 'Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own consciences.... This very kindness stings with intolerable insult. To be 'cured' against one's will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level of those who have not yet reached the age of reason or those who never will; to be classed with infants, imbeciles, and domestic animals.' (Lewis, 1996).

The notion of a good-life here is not primarily a moral one, perhaps not even a moral one at all, but rather a life that brings to an individual happiness and satisfaction. A happy, meaningful, and satisfying life is the way a good-life is defined. The sense of ‘happy’ is not one of blind smiling goofy cheerfulness, nor is ‘satisfaction’ a matter of smugness or passive contentment, rather the terms connote overall an amoral sense of personal flourishing and a degree of peace of mind in respect of the life one has as the individual whose life it is. Whatever travails the life has – and all lives do – the life, for most of its span, seems meaningful and valuable and more than worth living to the person whose life it is.

There may of course be an accidental connection to the moral if it turns out a highly moral life delivers a good-life in the sense defined. Some might say that a highly immoral life will lead to a bad-life, here taken to be the obverse of a good-life, that is, unhappy and unsatisfactory. This may be so in some individual cases, one might even hope it to be so as a matter of psychological truth and as reflecting a kind of moral justice. The latter point may just be wishful thinking. Yet it’s hard not to suppose there is some connection between a good-life and a morally good life in some sense. It is quite possible of course that someone finds their version of a good-life in precisely living a highly moral life in some way that may remain undefined for the purpose of the argument here, but which must be convincingly so for the person engaged in that life. In any case the moral aspect of one’s life is not, except for the very few, all there is to a life, and large portions of it consist of matters that are amoral, and yet of huge significance as to whether the life is a good-life.

The usual view of proponents of there being some generalizable conception of the good-life is that there are definable core features, and that other features a life may have over and above those are optional filigree decorative additions that it may be nice to have, and may even enhance the good-life, but are not essential to its being the good-life, and so may be given up if needs be. This, it will be argued, gets things upside down. It is those additional features particular to an individual life that make the difference between a life being happy and one of satisfaction, which may seem optional marginal additions to some generally characterizable good-life, that make the crucial difference between a good-life for the individual and one that is not. This makes a life, and a good-life in particular, analogous to a work of art which may be improved or ruined by tiny seemingly inconsequential changes, rather than being something derivable from

an abstracted common standard to which an individual life might be compared and found to accord with or found wanting.

Underlying the argument here is a plea for ignorance and hence modesty. Ignorance in knowing what will turn out to make any life a good-life, even one's own, and certainly so in respect of the lives of others that might be seen, for their own good, as things to be shaped, planned, guided and manipulated and set on course to a good-life for them. It might be said in a commonsense way that just experience should teach us this. But the abundant evidence of experience showing these things to be true has not stopped many people thinking and acting generation after generation in a way that endorses the opposite. Nor are people often very good at learning from experience, certainly not the experience of others no matter how heartfully others may make their case – thus mistakes have a ghastly tendency to be repeated over and over. But pointing at experience in some vague way with an implied 'look it's true' hardly constitutes an argument, despite that for some, little more by way of reflection is required in order to be convinced that trying to set up the or a good-life for others, and perhaps even for themselves if done rashly, is something to be avoided. So arguments are needed, and these will be presented.

Of course, part of the problem of convincing people that there is little to be said by way of characterizing the good-life, or that they might know of a good-life for another, is that people care about other people and the lives they live, especially those close to them, and feel an emotional and perhaps moral need to take steps, even take charge, to make sure things turn out all right for them. As a general attitude, and except in *extremis* – perhaps someone just about to back off a cliff while attempting to get the right distance to take a photograph, or drive blind drunk, and similar – this should be resisted. The reason for this is twofold. First, there is no such thing as the good-life as a universally valid state characterizable for an individual. Second, to act as if there were such a thing as the good-life for the individual will risk greatly doing more harm than good to a life an individual has. It should be noted that there is no sense in which there might be any kind of good-life except as construed as one for an individual. Individuals are the ones who live lives, therefore there is no other sense in which good-life may applied to anything else. Will the arguments presented here stop people over-zealously thinking they may justifiably have a significant hand in shaping and determining the good-life or a good-life for others? Quite possibly not. But then arguments can be good and have no takers and arguments can be

bad and have people queuing to sign on to what they appear to demonstrate. But a lesson can be taken, that in this case there is an explanation, if not a justification, for the resistance the view here will encounter. Some of that is owing to non-rational facts about people that arguments find slight or no purchase on. Of course that applies as a generality, not just in respect of the arguments here concerning the and a good-life. Arguments only work against arguments.

## 2.

A classical antithesis of the view expressed here is that of Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> For although he does not suppose there is a Good that might be the same across different kinds of things, different substances, he does suppose that we might identify a good for each kind, and do so in accordance with its function, so that something is good of its kind when it fulfils its function to the highest degree. This he applies to man. But the dubiousness of man, humankind, let alone an individual person, having a function that might be best exemplified is obvious immediately. If anything one of the distinctive features of persons in general is an ever-questioning, indeed self-questioning, account of what their function or purpose is. One might suppose that therefore a contemplative questioning life is humankind's highest good – but even that is not something clearly settled by the very same self-questioning.<sup>5</sup> In any case, this does not seriously impinge on what might be a good-life for an individual. Aristotle himself identifies the object of human life as being something that involves satisfaction, and points to happiness.<sup>6</sup> But unlike the argument here, Aristotle is still searching for a valid pan-individual notion of happiness that might be connected to one kind of life, whereas the argument here is that there can be no such singular identifiable kind of life that might be validly transferred across individuals and deliver for them happiness and satisfaction. Happiness and satisfaction are radically individual.

Religion of course is centrally based, setting the metaphysics to one side, on the conceit of knowing what is the good-life – a notion that usually confusingly stirs together 'good' in a moral sense and in an amoral sense, that is in the sense of the quality of that life in terms of happiness and satisfaction. It does so by a

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<sup>4</sup> (Aristotle 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Or we would all have stopped reading and thinking at Aristotle.

<sup>6</sup> (Aristotle 1976, 1097b22-1098a8.)

raft of prescriptions and proscriptions and religions have been quite willing to coerce others to save them from themselves when the occasion arises. Its clerics have literally made their living by imagining that they can and may take a stand as superior judges to the people who attend them on what the good-life is, and lay out to the benighted what they ought to do to improve themselves. If the arguments here are right this is a stance of astonishing, perhaps even, arrogant, zealous hubris, and one that more than likely may have disastrous consequences for the possibility of individuals attaining what for them is a good-life. The reaction based on the argument here should be that it is extraordinary to think you can do more good than harm in detailing what a good-life should be for any individual. It is an outlandish, perhaps monstrous, claim that one should guide with various degrees of force, people to live some conception of the good-life – which if the argument here is correct does not exist – and think that in doing so you will be not doing more harm, quite possibly vastly more harm, than good, to the possibility of individuals having a good-life that is happy and satisfying for them, indeed rather that one may be likely to cause them to have lives that are miserable and frustrated.

It may be considered harsh, but it may be argued that anyone who thinks there is a valid pan-individual conception of the good-life either has not lived very long, or if they have lived long has not noticed what has gone on around them, or else is predisposed by a pervading ideology or set of beliefs to not see reality as it is. This may explain some of the resistance the arguments and conclusions presented here might encounter. This point might be seen *ad hominem*, perhaps even offensively so. But it is arguable no more so, although the subject is more emotive here, than a Humean explanation as to why we misunderstand the nature of causation and its true source.

### 3.

The argument here overall is based on the fact that people are so individual that any attempt to plan, anticipate, control, or model what would be a good-life, a happy and satisfying one for an individual – and there are only individuals who actually live lives – is hopeless, and often highly harmful. This is because what makes someone have a happy and satisfying life is so unanticipatable, so particular, and so fine-grained and nuanced, and the constituents may appear to others as nothing of importance, indeed may not even register with others as a



feature of the life of someone needing to be taken into account in respect of their making it a good-life.

#### 4.

Five arguments will be presented to support the general claim and implied argument that there is no such thing as the good-life for an individual, nor may we know what a good-life for them may be. These I shall call (a) *Probability and Luck Argument*, (b) *Individual Values Argument*, (c) *Fine-grained and Nuanced Argument*, (d) *After-the-Fact Argument*, (e) *Experience Argument*.

##### (a) *Probability and Luck Argument*

The probability of our being able to anticipate let alone forecast how someone's future life might go, along with what might make that life a good-life, is incredibly low. Yet this is required for any determinate plans for an individual's good-life to have any chance of success. The point here is not just that we radically do not know future facts about someone's life, we also do not know the future facts relevant to making it a good-life. Just too many factors, most of which are impossible for us to know, influence how someone's life might turn out, for any actions intent on bringing about a certain determinate kind of life, deemed a good-life for others, to have anything but a vanishingly small chance of success, and therefore action attempting to bring about such a determinate good-life should be avoided. Luck, both good and bad, plays a part in this as 'luck' indicates things turning out certain ways because of factors that no-one could have reasonably anticipated let alone had any control over in a certain result being brought about. One must remember too that one of the factors making it even harder to determine what a good-life might be for someone is that person themselves, that is, not an external factor but the changing, evolving, nature of the that person. What they regard as a good-life for them is very unlikely to remain fixed but will itself change as they change and are changed by their movement through life. Again, as already hinted at, this argument builds on the idea of modesty and ignorance, and that to act in matters where knowledge is so very limited is at best vain-glorious hubris and at worst quite possibly culpably reckless. Moreover, given this ignorance, interventionist

positive action to determine a good-life for someone will not only be fraught with direct ever-branching forward moving lines of unintended consequences, things that might have happened, of which we are ignorant, might not happen, some of which may have been the very things that would have led an individual to a good-life, one that will no longer come about. That this points to things that would have happened if we had not acted that we will never know about has the unfortunate consequence of making our actions easier to justify and easier to live with, for it is hard to bring to the table evidence that must remain forever merely hypothetical and speculative of what might have been should the action not have been taken. One might respond that this argument could be turned on its head and that from inaction all the same considerations would follow. But this is a mistake. The difference is crucial, for with inaction there is no claim or pretence to being able to determine and control future events and what might be a good-life for someone, rather it is an acknowledgement of ignorance. Erring on the side of letting things be in respect of such an unknowable matter, what might be a good-life for someone, is justified by an extreme ignorance of what it might be and what might lead to it. Erring on the side of intervention in getting someone what one might suppose to be a good-life for them is enormously unjustified as it appeals to a claim to knowledge as to what a good-life for them is and what might lead to it that is indefensible and belied by the facts. So, there is no symmetry or similarity between acting and not acting when one is faced with a claim to knowledge in the first case and claim a to ignorance in the second case, for the second case is not a claim to some other kind of knowledge of what will happen if one does not act, but rather a claim to not knowing what will happen supporting inaction. Inaction in the envisioned cases is the obverse of action, not, as it might be interpreted, another form of 'action'. This is because action here is determinate and makes epistemic claims, whereas inaction is indeterminate, and need not and does not, make epistemic claims about our outcomes – on the contrary inaction affirms a denial of those epistemic claims.

As already hinted, action and inaction need not be absolute here. But anything that errs towards action with a claim to knowledge of the good-life generally or a good-life for an individual cannot be defended. We just do not know what it is or what will bring it about for an individual. This might seem to open the door for those who feel they act only moderately in respect of determining good-lives for others, and leave plenty of scope for the vagaries of

chance factors and luck. It is claimed here that very often this is not in fact the case, and the deterministic attempt to bring about a good-life for another when examined is much less modest than claimed, and errs heavily on the side of interventionist action when a discerning look at the situation suggests that one should consciously shy away from such action, and in a marked manner too, because of the irredeemable ignorance already referred to.

*(b) Individual Values Argument*

This holds that the values that determine whether an individual life is a good-life are ineradicably connected to those held by the individual, and no attempt to prejudge these by others is likely to be successful. One might think carefully what the denial of this entails: that the values others find in things, both positively and negatively, along with their relative distribution and weighting, adding up to what defines or might define a good-life for them, are going to be the same as those of oneself or be at least knowable with some degree of sureness (and here one refers back to argument (a)) by oneself. Again, this looks staggeringly unlikely. One must point again to the possible dire consequences of getting it wrong for someone, squared up with the supreme unlikelihood of getting it right, and draw the consequences that any attempt to lay down a good-life for someone is a mission not just of almost certain disaster but, if pursued with reflection, one of culpable arrogance.

One should note that this argument, and the claim it leads to, is distinct from any claims as to whether values are individually determined or not, or indeed any claim about what determines values. Rather it is the claim that what works to make an individual's life a good-life has to be the adopted values of the individual. No point about where values come from or what grounds them is involved in this and it is compatible with a variety of answers to the question.

*(c) Fine-grained and Nuanced Argument*

This is the defensible contention that what determines a good-life for the individual – reminding oneself that it is individuals who have a good-life (or a bad-life) in the sense of it being happy and one of satisfaction – is fine-grained and nuanced. What this amounts to is it not only being highly particular and not universalizable what determines a good-life for someone, but also that it may

come down to fine-grained features and considerations that will within themselves also qualitatively have to be nuanced a particular way. Change the group of things that really matter to an individual, or change the internal qualities of the items within the group, which will in turn change the identity of the whole, and they are likely to lose their effectiveness in providing a good-life. Crudely put, people like certain things and like those things a certain way.

This makes it very unlikely that one will be able to get any usable sense of what others might put together as a set of fine-grained nuanced features and considerations constituting what is for them a good-life. In the end, it is the small things and small highly particular features of those small things that determine a set that makes the difference between their being ones that provide the right assemblage for a good-life for someone or not, and there is not really the remotest chance of anyone but the individual knowing what they are, or indeed being able to even begin to construct a set for someone. Many of the features and considerations will not even register for others as features and considerations that might constitute a good-life for some individual simply because they only matter to that individual and are very unlikely to matter to any other individual exactly as they are and thus show up as features and considerations relevant to constructing an individual's good-life.

#### *(d) After-the-Fact Argument*

The danger of being deterministic about a good-life for others, and even too far in advance for oneself, is the phenomenon of convincing oneself, or trying to convince oneself, that the predetermined place where one ends up is where one should be, despite it being obvious that one is unhappy and dissatisfied with it. This can be hard to admit in various ways. It may be simply very difficult, close to impossible, to imagine changing one's situation. One may not, because of the path one has taken and where one has ended up, and because of the very fact that one has not taken another path and ended up elsewhere, be able to contemplate well alternatives or how to bring them about. All the things that would have happened to one, to make it that one ended up elsewhere did not happen, and so one is not affected by any of them, making one a different person. In addition, any changes that one may think of making will be exposed to the world, including perhaps those who precipitated one to where one is, with putatively helpful intentions of bringing about a good-life for you, and thus to

make manifest defiantly that you think they were wrong can be terribly difficult. It might seem, among other things, ungrateful, disloyal, unloving, and carries with it implied criticism, perhaps blame. As the individual it can be hard to admit to oneself that one let oneself be led to a place in life which is ill-fitted to being a good-life. Hard to admit one perhaps suppressed alternative conceptions of a good-life and in a sense kowtowed to others. Incredibly difficult after the fact of one's being where one is, to disentangle it from one's life leading up to it so that one might form some alternative that is a good-life in fact suited to oneself. One may have a tendency to think one should be enjoying the life one has so wished for by others, and deny that one is not, since after all it was prepared for by people who supposedly care for you and regard themselves as wise as to what a good-life would be. Unfortunately, the latter matter, the wisdom, does not follow from the former, the caring intent to help, and indeed cannot if the ignorance argument here is correct. You need more than good intentions to be a good eye surgeon, and here, in the case of a good-life, becoming an expert is impossible because you are trying to do what only an individual can do for themselves. One is not only more likely to get a good-life right if it is by a process one has come to feeling it is a result of one's own determinations, one is also more likely to think that it is a good-life merely by dint of it being something one has come to through one's own determined idea of what a good-life is for you as an individual. If a life is not a good-life one is less likely to resent it and think it a better life than it is, if not quite the good-life one might have wanted, if one thinks that in whatever way matters to one, that it was at one's own behest that one is where one is.

(e) *Experience Argument*. What constitutes a good-life (or indeed a bad-life) for oneself consists of things that cannot be identified by thought alone, but have to be discovered by experience.<sup>7</sup> Rather like, indeed perhaps exemplified by, discovering that one has a passion for music, but comparatively little interest in football. There is no *a priori* thought process or intellectual reflection that is going to show you that conclusion. One has predilections, and there is no way they can be divined by thought, by ideas and arguments. They are non-rational features of oneself, and one may very well not come to realize well or fully what they are across a whole life, let alone towards its beginning so that it might be

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<sup>7</sup> Something of Bergson's distinction between 'intellect' and 'intuition' may be said to be in play here. See (Bergson 1991).

used as a source to deterministically circumscribe a good-life (avoiding a bad-life) for oneself later. It is something one learns about oneself as one goes along. If that is true, then it is even more, indeed greatly more, unlikely that others will be able to know what these predilections are or what kind of life, regardable by the individual whose life it is as a good-life, might be. In order for the constituents of what might constitute the good-life for an individual to be accessed, made up of the very feel of a certain kind of life in all its fine-grained, nuanced, internally interactive complexity, one must be the person whose life it is. No-one else can do that for us; no-one else should purport to, or set themselves up, as doing that for us. Of course, as has been said, most people who do that for others would either disagree that they cannot know best for others, but they are mistaken for the reasons given here, or they deny, despite what they do obviously constituting knowing best for others, that that is really what they are doing.

## 5.

It will not have gone unnoticed that in the course of the discussion and arguments, the reference has been mostly to determining and bringing about a good-life for others. In fact some of the same considerations apply to oneself, but to a lesser degree. This may seem surprising, and contradictory, given that so much of the case is placed on the individual alone being able to determine what needs to be involved in a good-life for them. But this appearance is easily explained, and the explanation does not help the case for those who might over-determine a good-life for others, rather the opposite. The reason that the same considerations apply to oneself is that oneself changes over time, and that one's future self is not as inaccessible to that same self as it is to others, is to an extent unknown, and therefore should be treated as 'other' in respect of what features and considerations will produce a good-life. This defect in knowledge about oneself helps the determiner of a good-life for others not one jot, but rather adds – indeed it has already been alluded to above – another layer of unknowability to what an individual is going to be like, in addition to the unknowability of determining a good-life's constituents for any other individual taken in snapshot at any moment in time. This leaves one to conclude that the same kind of caution apply to what features and considerations will determine a good-life for oneself as applies to determining it for others. Not to same degree,

not to same extent, but still the ignorance is there. But one can see an argument for not doing things are irrevocable, although time passing can make them so (no-one is going to become a world-class cellist taking up the instrument at fifty), but there is nothing anyone can do about that.

## 6.

We try to form and shape our life as best we can so that it turns out to be something like a good-life for us. A life that is happy and gives satisfaction. This stands as a virtual truism. Given the uncertainty of things beyond our control, which at the same time are often unpredictable, such a shaping is difficult enough in our own cases, exacerbated by our proceeding through life being one of not only honing what will truly give us a good-life but also honing our faculty whereby we know better what might give us a good-life. A difficult enough task in our own case, and one of immense complexity. A hopeless task in the case of another. And in the case of others highly likely to do more harm than good as the chance of getting it wrong is vastly greater. The conclusion is that we should not accept, or be very wary indeed about, anyone who claims to know what the good-life is for people, and even more so what a good-life is for an individual. That 'good-life' only attaches meaningfully to individuals entails that talk of the good-life for people in general is meaningless. Meaningless and dangerous, for it ignores and rides roughshod over what can only be a matter of a good-life, that life as it is for the individual whose life it is. This sounds hubristic enough in our own case, and inviting a fall, but at least then we are the ones who carry most of the consequences – although there will be those around us to whom we should be obliged to give thought. In the case of anyone claiming to know what the good-life is for others, quite apart from the matter of it quite likely transgressing the freedom of others to determine their own lives and form a good-life, one should, it is argued, react with the view that it is almost certainly false and with an equal degree of certainty dangerous for the well-being of others. That people have a good-life is, one might contend, the most important thing for them. What is the case in respect of it really matters. Over-prescription and epistemic hubristic, sometimes culpable intentions – although perpetrators are rarely able to see themselves as such – are the greatest threats to it. If there was ever a warning from history, from life, indeed from philosophical reflection, this is it.

7.

There is no implication in what is said here that when others interfere less, people left to their own devices will be guaranteed in fact to find a good-life. The point is not that, but rather only that the individual whose life it is will know a good-life for them when they see it, so to speak, and no-one else can judge that for them, whether they in fact find a good-life or not.

We can no more judge a good-life for other individuals than judge what kind of music they will like or even if they will like music much at all. Indeed, the individual whose life it is will equally, by analogy, not know until after experience what kind of music he or she likes or whether music is important to them in their life, or what kind of friends they will prefer or indeed encounter, or what job they will come to think would niche-like suit them, or whether they like going out and travelling a lot or whether they prefer to stay mostly at home. These are not add-ons to someone's life, they are their life. We have no idea of what people will encounter or how on being encountered it will be regarded by them, nor to what extent how they regard things will determine what they further encounter through the decisions they make, affecting where and when they are in the world, and then further how what they encounter will feed back into how they regard things. We just do not know. We discover these things as we go through our lives. And yet all these matters are what forms the life of someone and informs whether it will be a good-life for them or not.

The upshot of the view here points to two sides having a part to play in determining a good-life for any given individual. One side is for others to admit ignorance and be modest and not be overly deterministic as to the good-life for other individuals or a good-life for anything given individual. The other side, on the part of the individual whose life it is, it is a matter not only of proceeding, because of relative ignorance, in a piecemeal fashion<sup>8</sup> through one's life in constructing something like a good-life for oneself, but also of propagating the wherewithal to defy others in their conception of the good-life as a general valid

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<sup>8</sup> Without wanting to make too much of the analogy, one might say that what has been said to apply to society applies to the individual. That one should proceed piecemeal with changes and not according to some vast overall plan, and this because of our necessary ignorance at any given time and overtime. One finds these arguments not only in (Popper 1974), but also pervading those of the Austrian School of Economics. One might say that the individual is like a society determined by the complexities of the price mechanism, whereas to plan things for others looks like ignoring the knowledge that can only come from that internal price mechanism, which nothing in fact can substitute for.



pan-individual notion and defy others as required in respect of what it is that would constitute a good-life for oneself. This not only suggests a strong will, but also a high degree of emotional honesty about oneself that one is not afraid to follow through and support, perhaps, by argument.

This does not mean that one should not be open to the advice and suggestions of others, but one must make positions and arguments one's own, and resist positively merely taking on the influence of others unquestioned.<sup>9</sup> Nor does anything said here entail that one cannot learn both theoretically and empirically from the lives of others, from their success and their mistakes (failures), but it is entailed that in order to harness these to help one to have a good-life one has to shape those features of other's lives to fit one's own predilections and sensibilities – one is looking at the particular features of the lives of others, and one has to make what one may learn from them, particular and specific features for oneself and one's own life, and this has to be done piecemeal, with no overarching guide to the good-life.

Nothing in what has been said implies that one will get what one wants in life, that is a good-life, but it does imply that one has a greater probability of bringing it about if one is left to your own judgement on the matter rather than following the judgement of others, and that if you get it, get to a good-life, only you will know it when you see it.

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<sup>9</sup> This thought is memorably expressed by John Locke in 'The Epistle to the Reader' that begins *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. He entreats the reader 'make use of thy own Thoughts when reading' and that the opinions should not be 'taken upon Trust of others', for 'tis not worth while to be concerned, what he says or thinks, who says or thinks only as he is directed by another'. Finally there is the startling turnaround from how many previously thought their opinions should be overweeningly respected and honoured, when Locke says bravely of someone reading his work, 'If thou judgest for they self, I know thou wilt judge candidly; and then I shall not be harmed or offended, whatever they Censure'. (Locke 1987, p.7.)

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